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RESEARCH

"That Old Black Magic": Noir and Music in Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido's *Blacksad*

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Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido's *Blacksad* is a comic series that evokes the noir tradition through thematic and visual callbacks to noir films and comics. As they use noir tropes, the comics illuminate the tensions in both noir and comics. Yet, *Blacksad* stands out as a liminal text that simultaneously references and reverses traditional noir themes. One often-overlooked noir trope is the inclusion of music in each comic album. *Blacksad* has often been analysed as a purely visual text. However, the inclusion of music enhances the text as the songs themselves create a layered meaning in the work that is relevant to the styles present in both comics and film noir. The music enhances the intertextual and noir references embedded in *Blacksad*, both building the world around the story and enhancing the storytelling of an inherently 'silent' medium.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism; *Blacksad*; European comics; diegetic; intertextuality

Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido's *Blacksad* follows Private Investigator John Blacksad, an anthropomorphic cat who is hired to solve various cases including murders and child abductions while combatting racist factions and atomic bomb threats. It becomes clear from the first cover of *Blacksad: Somewhere within the Shadows* that the comics use noir stylistic devices and archetypes. The album cover features Blacksad in a suit and trench coat aiming a gun at an unseen foe while his femme fatale, Natalia, grips his chest and looks coolly over her shoulder. The positioning of the figures on the cover, as well as the low-key lighting that accentuates the contour of the woman's face, emulates posters advertising 1940s and 1950s American films and the overall noir style. From the outset, *Blacksad* blatantly evokes the noir tradition,

namely through the transatlantic blending of styles and intertextuality. This is evident in the French album format of the comic in which each comic is around 60 pages. However, an often-overlooked aspect of the comic, and an overlooked noir trope, is the music. While music in comics is not new, the music in *Blacksad* is unique because it recalls and perpetuates the music tradition in noir. In doing so, it reveals the inherent tensions and ambiguous combinations in both comics and noir, namely the dichotomy between silence and music. This article will explore the ways in which *Blacksad* is a noir text through its constant blending and intertextuality, and then discuss how music in the comic augments these tensions.

Intertextual Tensions: *Blacksad* as Liminal Noir Text

The *Blacksad* comics have both thematic and visual connections to the noir style including character archetypes, setting, lighting, colour, racial tensions, silence, and music. Due to the inherent tensions and paradoxes associated with the comics medium as well as the film noir style, *Blacksad* itself begins to embody various ambiguities, namely the comics' use of music to evoke the noir tradition. The majority of the music in the comics is diegetic, meaning it is internal to the fictional world. John Blacksad interacts with music by listening to the radio, playing records, listening to live music or playing the piano. Film critic and theorist André Bazin's idea of finding "equivalence in the meaning of forms" when adapting a story from one medium to another relates to comics in that they have 'lighting' and 'silence,' albeit not the same as in film (1948: 42). By including music, *Blacksad* is problematizing its role as a noir comic, in that the medium itself is unable to produce sound. However, comics are able to suggest silence in the lack of dialogue or equivalent representations of sound on the comic page. Charles Hatfield describes comics as "an art of tensions", because they "can be complex means of communication and are always characterised by a plurality of messages" (2005: 32, 36). Similarly, James Naremore posits, "film noir occupies a liminal space somewhere between Europe and America, high modernism and 'blood melodrama,' and between low-budget crime movies and art cinema" (1988: 220). Like the film noir style it appropriates, *Blacksad* occupies a liminal space between American and European comics cultures, between human and animal and also between comics and film noir.

On top of this liminal space, which suggests that it is its own entity, *Blacksad* is also made up of a complex interweaving of intertextual and visual references to other works. Namely, the music included in each album is used to reveal the irony and mood of the scene, to reveal the internal struggle of the main character, and as foreshadowing. The songs themselves create a layered meaning in the work that is relevant to the styles present in both comics and film noir. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that no work is "monumental" or independent as every work is influenced by others (1986: 72). *Blacksad*, like the noir style itself, is heavily influenced by music, literature and popular culture such as comics. On top of emulating the film noir style and tropes, *Blacksad* visually recalls and references other noir works. In an interview with *Le Figaro*, the artist Juanjo Guarnido explains that John Blacksad was inspired by actor Marlon Brando (2010). Other scenes, such as the circus in the fifth album *Amarillo* (2014), were inspired by Cecil B. Mille's 1952 film, *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Vertaldi and Delcroix 2013). Both the album and the film feature a character that runs away to a circus, attempting to conceal their identity because they are wanted by the authorities. There are also literary references in *Amarillo*, to John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957), and the influence of the Beat Generation, as well as musical references to Charlie Parker in *A Silent Hell* (2012). This inherent intertextuality across various media highlights Graham Allen's analysis of Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia as, "language's ability to contain within it many voices, one's own *and* other voices" (2000: 28). *Blacksad* is able to contain references to other works, spanning across multiple mediums, as well as create a liminal space between noir and comics.

The notion of intertextuality brings forward ideas of hybridity and mixing, as seen in both the anthropomorphic representation of the characters as well as their racial identities denoted by their fur colour. Marc Singer finds that comics "have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race. Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances" (2002: 107). In *Blacksad*, the characters have both racial and animal signifiers that characterise them. John Blacksad visually represents his racial tension through his representation as both black and white. The work also references historical political

caricature cartoons as well as the 'funny animal' comics popularized in American newspapers with the use of anthropomorphic characters. Like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), *Blacksad* reverses the presumption of the reader by creating a serious and politically charged comic featuring talking animal heads. The creators even reference *Maus* in the work by depicting Hitler as a cat in Spiegelman's style (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 154). As a text, *Blacksad* is liminal in that "it exists at the *limen* or the threshold between two opposing conceptual categories, and so can be defined by both and neither of them" (Hurley 2007: 139), thus, setting it apart from or outside of both film noir and 'funny animal' comics. It also, however, continuously references works that are fundamental to film noir, as well as anthropomorphic and noir comics, which implicitly positions the work within these contexts. It is also liminal as an international text in that the comics are set in the United States while they are produced by Spanish creators in French for the French market. The albums are French in style in that they are hardbacked and longer than traditional American comics. As both within and outside of these categories, *Blacksad* proves a rich, international text to analyse in terms of meaning, starring a character who lies precariously between man and animal, and is racially a mixture between black and white.

The cover image of the first album, as mentioned in the introduction, is an example of *Blacksad*'s intertextuality (**Figure 1**). Namely, it is a visual reference to a poster promoting Howard Hawks' film *The Big Sleep* (1946) starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Both the cover and *The Big Sleep* poster show a middle-aged male protagonist pointing a gun at an unseen foe in defense of his love interest. However, the images themselves reveal ambiguities inherent to noir and comics. Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton note an ambiguity in the characterisations of film noir protagonists, in that, "he is often more mature, almost old, and not too handsome. Humphrey Bogart typifies him" (1955: 22). The protagonists in these images, including Humphrey Bogart himself, fit this ambiguous characterization and are cast as the rugged detectives who will solve the case no matter the cost. However, it is not just the men that are characterized ambiguously. Borde and Chaumeton find that the women in noirs are ambiguous as well, describing the femme fatale as "frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet



Figure 1: Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido, *Blacksad: Somewhere within the Shadows* 2000, Dargaud, cover.

ensnared, she falls victim to her own traps" (1955: 22). Blacksad's lover, Natalia, is drawn as an anthropomorphic cat, with a combination of delicate features as well as claws. Her anthropomorphism makes her literally half predator, but she is an ambiguous character as well. She is also a victim because of her actions: she cheats on a man who then has her killed. Similarly, in the poster for *The Big Sleep*, Bacall's character is gripping Bogart's suit in what appears to be fright. Yet, her facial expression is more menacing, ambiguously showing that she is staring down the foe as well.

Beyond the initial images, however, both of the works reveal a much more complex treatment of noir. Borde and Chaumeton note "the inconstancy of Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep* may not cost her life" which they argue is atypical of a femme fatale "who is fatal for herself" (1955: 22). Instead, Bacall's character Vivian only appears to be, or poses as, the femme fatale. In reality, her actions are not to save herself, but to protect her father and sister. Because of this, she does not technically fit into Borde and Chaumeton's definition of the femme fatale. While the *Blacksad* cover offers a visual reference to the poster for *The Big Sleep*, it does not mirror the plot. *Somewhere within the Shadows* pays homage to the film through the use of ambiguous characters that fall both within and outside of the normal characteristics for film noir protagonists. While the cover shows her standing with Blacksad, Natalia is unable to fulfill the role of the femme fatale in the comics. The first page of the first album opens on her dead body. The "protagonists" as depicted on the cover had only known each other for a brief time, when Blacksad was her bodyguard-turned-lover, and they separated before Blacksad could actually protect her. The temptations and sexual tensions between the two have happened in the past and are not the main point of the album, as the initial reading of cover may suggest. *Blacksad* uses visual intertextual references to other noirs in order to posit itself within the style of film noir and, in doing so, is able to reveal ambiguities and themes in both the comic and the original films. *Blacksad* is a mix of old and new, securing itself in a liminal space separate from both that allows it to have its own identity. While it remains separate, the visual associations to other works within the same style enrich the reading experience, giving an insight into the layered meanings inherent in the work.

Hit That Jive: Multifunctionality of *Blacksad's* Music

Alongside Borde and Chaumeton's characteristics of noir, other scholars have considered music to be an important element of noir. Robert Miklitsch analyses the use of music in 1940s American noir films, arguing that "despite the pervasive presence of musical numbers in classic film noir, not to mention the use of voice-over and hard-boiled dialogue, the genre [...] has been viewed primarily in visual terms" (2011: 1). Martin Lund similarly notes that music played a key part in classic film noirs in that

it "carried associations of angst, longing or ideology" (2015: 16). Unlike the *Marvel Noir* comics Lund assesses in his article, which include music as a way to connote pastness, *Blacksad* uses music in a more filmic sense to reveal different aspects of the scene itself or the characters within it. In *Blacksad*, nearly all the music is diegetic, meaning it is internal to the fictional world. Each album uses music to reveal the irony and mood of a scene, illuminate the interiority of the main character, and/or as foreshadowing. Music plays to the mood and plot of the comic and allows the creators to reference relevant pieces of music from the time, as well as immerse the work in intertextuality.

Music is used as poetic irony in the second album *Arctic-Nation*. The first instance of music in the album is when the leader of the white supremacist group, Karup, is organizing a group of children singing a hymn at church. Karup uses the church in order to propagate his racist ideology, and later in the album, is falsely accused of molesting/killing children. This leads to his eventual hanging at the hand of his own group. In the same album, after the death of Karup and his second in command, Blacksad is dressing for a funeral while listening to Billie Holliday's song "Strange Fruit" (1939) on the radio (**Figure 2**). The song itself, originally a poem published in 1937, is a protest against the lynchings of African Americans. The "strange fruit" hanging from a tree references the swaying of a body hung from a rope. Often lynchings were held by or at least attended by members of churches, explaining the line "pastoral scene of the gallant south" (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 106). Music in this album is used ironically; Karup is promoting his white supremacist ideology within a church to the children, which ultimately causes his death by hanging, and Blacksad is listening to a song about lynching as he prepares for the funeral of a murdered woman. This song also mirrors a lynching scene at the beginning of the album, highlighting the racial issues within the work. And Karup, who was likely responsible for the lynching at the beginning of the album, finishes the book at the end of a rope. "Strange Fruit" serves not only to reveal irony in *Arctic-Nation*, but also as an intertextual reference to poetry and racial struggles in the United States during the 1960s in which *Blacksad* is set.



Figure 2: Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido, *Blacksad*, 2010, Dark Horse Books, p. 106.

Like in film noirs, the diegetic music in *Blacksad* is also used to reveal the interiority of the protagonist and as foreshadowing. Miklitsch suggests that in films such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945), Curtis Bernhardt's *Possessed* (1947) and John Brahm's *The Locket* (1945), diegetic music "becomes, in tandem with signature visual flourishes, an expressionist device to capture the tortured interiority of the main character" (2011: 3). This is also true in *The Big Sleep* where Bacall's character sings with a live band while in the gambling

house. The song, Anita O'Day's "And Her Tears Flowed Like Wine" (1944), depicts a woman crying because her husband gambles all their money away. It not only sets the scene, as Bogart's character has just entered the casino, but also foreshadows the pain and tears that will come from the casino owner. In *Blacksad's* third album, *Red Soul*, music more subtly reveals Blacksad's internal feelings. While protecting his client, Blacksad meets Alma Mayer, an author, who is standing at a piano. He begins to play the piano and the sound is depicted as balloons with music notes (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 139). Gary C. Thomas argues that the piano as an instrument can reveal certain things about characters when, "played in public, for money or show, it's mostly a manly affair; played in private, for pleasure or its sublimations, a decidedly feminine, even emasculating one" (2007: 279). Blacksad playing the piano in front of Alma instead of an audience reveals an intimacy between the two of them and foreshadows their intimate relationship. Their intimacy was also foretold in the title of the comic and his love interest Alma's name. In Spanish, "alma" translates to soul. The title of the album is "*Red Soul*" or in Spanish, "*Alma Roja*," which combines both the love interest's name as well as the main colour used in the album.

Later, while making post-coital coffee for himself and Alma, Blacksad is playing Ella Fitzgerald's "That Old Black Magic" (1961). As they lie in bed, the lyrics reveal how they feel about each other as well as pay homage to the film noir style (**Figure 3**). The lyrics, "You are the lover that I've waited for the mate that fate had me created for" ring true to Blacksad's inner dialogue as he holds Alma against his chest (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 161). The final words reveal that the old black magic is called love, leading Alma to comment, "there's a superstitious side to you after all" (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 161). Blacksad responds, "What else can an old black cat like me believe in?" (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 161). This not only reveals Blacksad's belief in the connection he has with Alma, but also plays upon the superstition of a black cat being unlucky. The superstition holds true when Blacksad is unable to meet Alma at Niagara Falls, causing their relationship to end. The song lyrics reveal Blacksad's feelings towards Alma, but also foreshadow their inability to be together. The very last panel in the album reveals the dedication Alma put in the book she gave Blacksad, citing the lyrics and saying, "Don't call



Figure 3: Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido, *Blacksad*, 2010, Dark Horse Comics, p. 161.

it superstition... Say instead 'that Old Black Magic called Love'" (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 176). In this album, music plays a key role in revealing the mood of the protagonist. It also references Jacques Tourneur's noir film *Cat People* (1942), which includes superstitions about a people who have magical powers that turn them into black panthers when angered or sexually aroused. Because of this, the woman who turns into a panther in the film is never able to fulfil her sexual desires. Similarly, in *Blacksad*, "That Old Black Magic" foreshadows the couple's inability to be together and also reveals their lingering feelings for one another. Ella Fitzgerald's song returns in *Amarillo*, when Blacksad is being driven to Denver, Colorado by a parrot. The song plays on the car radio, leading the driver to comment, "Speakin' o' coloreds! Lissen ta jus' how low down an' funky they get when they start ta singin'..." (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2014: 35). In this panel, Blacksad is noticeably angry and punches the parrot off-panel. Blacksad's reaction references both *Red Soul*, with the song reminding him of Alma, as well as the racial tensions in *Arctic-Nation*. "That Old Black Magic" reveals Blacksad's inner struggle, foreshadows his inability to be with Alma, and is used as both an intertextual and metatextual reference in the comics.

The fourth album, *A Silent Hell*, revolves around the music industry in 1950s New Orleans. Faust Lachappelle, mogul, hires Blacksad to locate his top performer, Sebastian "Little Hand" Fletcher. While looking for clues, Blacksad encounters a street peddler named Big Bill Lenoir who used to perform with Sebastian. Lenoir is

introduced singing Bessie Smith's "Devil's Gonna Get You" (1929), alluding to the style of New Orleans Blues music (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 21). However, the song also foreshadows the death of LaChapelle who had poisoned an entire town, subjecting them to deaths, miscarriages, and birth defects for his own monetary gain (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 53). In order to bring this matter to light, Sebastian wants to perform Lenoir's song titled 'Pizen Blues' which translates to 'Poison Blues' in Gullah, a southern, creole dialect spoken in the affected town (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 23). Though the lyrics are never shown, the story of Caldonia's 'poison blues' is shared with Blacksad over images of Sebastian singing during his final performance. The poison also refers to Sebastian's drug addiction, inspired by the life and music of Charlie Parker. In the same album, Sebastian's wife, Hannah, sings Billy Holliday's "Summertime" (1936) to her new born child, after giving birth without her husband (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 57). The song lyrics continue onto the next page, while the images change to show Blacksad racing to get to Sebastian before he injects himself with poison and arriving too late (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 58) (**Figure 4**). The irony between the slow, happy song and Blacksad's rushed movements is mirrored with the irony of the new life of the child and the subsequent death of the father.

A combination of silence and music later reveals the identity of the villain who poisons Sebastian, wearing a disguise with a cape and ram's skull. He is introduced as the villain on the first page of the album, as the character crushes poisonous tablets into powder (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 7). His identity is masked not only by the skull, but also by the silent panels in which he puts on his disguise. The panel focuses on the bottle of poison and shows the reflection of the antagonist as he puts his disguise on. Silence here works as a way to establish and characterize the villain, but also as foreshadowing for the poisoning of Sebastian. Music and silence are then used to reveal the identity of the "Devil". The first row of panels on the page are adorned with music notes, revealed in the second panel to be diegetic music coming from a record player (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2012: 52) (**Figure 5**). These top panels remain without text, though, slowly panning out from a fireplace to a hand. The first panel shows the villain's disguise burning in the fireplace, while the second



Figure 4: Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido, *Blacksad: A Silent Hell*, 2012, Dark Horse Books, p. 58.

reveals the record player and source of the musical noes. The third panel reveals that the record playing is that of Lachapelle Big Band. Because of this, the hand in the fourth panel belongs to Faust Lachapelle. The record label mogul, and Sebastian's former boss, then goes on to explain to Blacksad why he had to poison Sebastian while Lachapelle himself was waiting to die. The combination of music and silence, and the subsequent closure between the panels, is what allows the reader to identify



Figure 5: Juan Diaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido, *Blacksad: A Silent Hell*, 2012, Dark Horse Books, p. 52.

the villain. The music is Lachapelle's own Big Band music, and the album shows a younger version of himself commanding the band from the front. In *A Silent Hell*, music is a focal point in the plot and is used to reveal villains, deaths and emotions. The tension between music and silence in the comics form is most noticeable in this album. The music at the top of the panels both guides the eye of the reader as well as guides them to the conclusion that Lachapelle is the villain. The inherent silence of the panels and lack of dialogue creates and builds the tension toward the reveal.

Other albums use music more subtly to evoke foreshadowing. In *Somewhere Within the Shadows*, Blacksad listens to an orangutan play Bessie Smith's "Cemetery Blues" (1923) written by Sid Laney, in a bar before he goes to a cemetery himself to look for clues (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2010: 32). *Amarillo* features Neal Beato, a hyena lawyer, singing "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66" (1946) to Blacksad's nephew (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2014: 42). The song alludes to the road trip Blacksad has taken to get to his sister in New Mexico. It also details various other states and cities, including Amarillo, Texas, that Blacksad will visit by the end of the album. Similarly, while at a dive house party, a young lion poet named Chad and his group of friends are listening to Nat King Cole's "Hit That Jive, Jack" (1940), whose lyrics coincide with the party's illegal activity and drug use (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2014: 21). After Chad and his gang steal Blacksad's car on the way to Amarillo, Blacksad seeks help from a hardened, leather-clad gang of sheep. Their leather jackets read "Let it Bleat", a reference to The Rolling Stones' album "Let it Bleed" (1969) as well as

Marlon Brando's gang in Lazslo Benedek's film *The Wild One* (1953) (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2014: 17). This foreshadows Blacksad's joining the gang in an effort to get his car back while referencing both music and film.

Music is embedded in the world of *Blacksad*. By including music in the comics, the creators not only evoke the noir tradition, but also provide a leitmotif for each album: Bessie Smith's "Cemetery Blues" in *Somewhere within the Shadows*, Billy Holiday's "Strange Fruit" in *Arctic Nation*, Ella Fitzgerald's "That Old Black Magic" in *Red Soul*, Bessie Smith's "Devil's Gonna Git You" in *A Silent Hell*, and both Nat King Cole's "Route 66" and "Hit that Jive Jack" in *Amarillo*. The comics pull upon the noir tradition of music and use songs from the period to set the tone of each album: Natalia's death evokes 'cemetery blues', the lynched African Americans are 'strange fruit' hanging from the trees, Blacksad attempts to believe in 'that old black magic' called love in the midst of nuclear warfare, the devil and the drugs eventually 'get' to Sebastian, and Blacksad 'gets his kicks on Route 66' while Chad 'hits that jive' and faces the consequences. The songs are both relevant to the time as well as to the intertextual references throughout the work. The songs themselves create a layered meaning in the work that is relevant to the styles present in both comics and film noir. The use of music enhances the intertextual and noir references embedded in *Blacksad*, both building the world around the story and enhancing the storytelling in a 'silent' medium. Music augments the inherent tensions in both noir and comics, highlighting the blending and intertextuality of the style and medium.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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